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Walk Back the Cat

WASHINGTON
When intelligence professionals want to figure out what went wrong, they convene what they call "the murder board." This group of second-guessers reexamines estimates in the light of subsequent events; its review — which can reveal anything from mistaken motivation to moles — is called "walking back the cat."

Let us apply that technique to the operation that brought ruination to the second Reagan term. Perhaps it will cast light on the central question: What caused a President who came to office on a wave of American revulsion at weakness shown to hostage-takers to trade arms for hostages?

We have been told it all began in May 1985 with a visit to Israel by Michael Ledeen, a staff consultant to Robert McFarlane at the N.S.C., to discuss intelligence-sharing on Iran; at that meeting, Prime Minister Peres sought approval for a shipment of arms to Iran. Colonel McFarlane, supposedly for purely strategic motives, then "tasked" the C.I.A. to develop the plan that became the basis for the "opening to Iran."

I don't buy that. My theory is that a human element, involving a more powerful player, was at the root of the affair.

On March 16, 1984, the C.I.A. station chief in Beirut, William Buckley, was kidnapped by Iranian terrorists. We know that the N.S.C.'s Lieut. Col. Oliver North promptly went to the Texas millionaire H. Ross Perot to provide \$2 million in ransom. At the same time, Colonel North reportedly prepared a National Security Decision Directive, signed by President Reagan in early April, setting up a commando rescue mission headed by Richard Secord. (Mr. Reagan has forgotten the first plan and remembers the second.)

We have never stopped to ask: Why Colonel North? He had no official connection to the captured C.I.A. man. It is far more likely that in both the private ransom effort and the proposed official rescue mission, Colonel North was acting at the behest of his mentor, William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence. Casey was by this time using Colonel North as his operational man at the N.S.C.

The ransom offer was rejected and the rescue mission was deemed impossible. During the year that followed, Director Casey received reports of the torture of his agent, which led to the likelihood of the compromise of many other agents throughout the Middle East and in Iran. We do not now know of other efforts made by the Director to get his Beirut station chief out of the tortur-

ers's hands, but that such efforts took place can be assumed.

I assume this because Bill Casey was that sort of spymaster. During World War II, he sent his O.S.S. agents behind Nazi lines and suffered personally when they were caught. He once told me of a woman agent captured by the Gestapo; her torturers sent back pictures to American intelligence, which caused the young Casey great anguish. Her death under torture was an episode he never forgot or forgave.

By April 1985 agent Buckley was near death, and the diplomatic activity was undertaken by Colonel McFarlane's N.S.C. On Sept. 11, the Iranians through the Israelis asked Mr. McFarlane to name one hostage for release; it should not be surprising that the name chosen was Casey's man Buckley. But on June 3, according to a fellow hostage, Buckley had died; we did not learn of this until mid-October when Islamic Holy War released a photograph of the shrouded corpse.

By then, the cancer-afflicted Bill Casey was deeply into his Iran open-

Genesis of the Iran-contra affair.

ing, which he ran through the N.S.C. in conjunction with his contra support. Grand strategy grew from the save-Buckley seed; only Bill Casey, and not some apparatchik or cowboy, could have enlisted George Bush and Don Regan and persuaded the President over the combined opposition of George Shultz and Caspar Weinberger.

In walking back the cat to seek the genesis, do we exaggerate the human element? Consider the outburst toward the end of Robert McFarlane's testimony last week, when he was pressed on why Congress had not been notified of Iran dealings.

That conflicted man, after days of tightly containing his emotions, cracked and cried on that very point: "... terrorists know that whenever they commit terrorism against Israel, something, somehow, somewhere is going to happen. ... you can be god-damn sure if any Israeli is caught, he's going to have his Government going after the people who did it!"

That confirms my suspicion that Casey's passion to free his station chief started the Reagan Administration down the road of appeasement. □